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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHINGTON DC

RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

RHMFIUU/CDR JPAC HICKAM AFB HI

RHHMUND/COMMARFORPAC

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENTIANE 000410

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS

PACOM FOR J52 (LACY, MA)

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PACOM FOR J45 (NICHOLLS, SCHULER)

PACOM FOR PACAF/SGZ (CINCO, OH, PALMER)

DOD FOR OSD-POLICY (LAI, STERN)

DOD FOR DSCA

JPAC FOR MUNIPALLI

PHNOM PENH ALSO FOR DATT

HANOI ALSO FOR DATT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: MARR MASS MOPS PREL LA

SUBJECT: MILITARY-TO-MILITARY RELATIONS WITH LAOS STEADILY EXPANDING

REFS: A. 07 VIENTIANE 00725

1B. 07 VIENTIANE 00092

1C. 07 VIENTIANE 00625

1D. 07 VIENTIANE 00790

1E. 08 VIENTIANE 00061

1F. 07 VIENTIANE 00914

1G. 08 VIENTIANE 00094

11. (U) SUMMARY: In the past two years, military-to-military relations with Laos have progressed quickly, including a long-sought agreement to exchange defense attaches (DATTs) and the implementation of an International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. The IMET program began with a Distinguished Visitors Orientation Tour (DVOT), the first time a high-level Lao military official visited Washington, D.C. since 1975; during the visit the senior Lao official announced approval for the DATT exchange. Another first was senior Lao military attendance at the Chiefs of Defense (CHODs) Conference hosted by Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander Admiral Keating in Honolulu in October 2007. The Lao Ministry of National Defense (MND) has participated in two major avian influenza training programs in Vientiane during the past year, accepted invitations to a range of PACOM-funded regional programs, and sent two military officers to the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in San Antonio, Texas, to study English. These and other developments illustrate steadily improving relations with what has traditionally been a very isolated branch of the Lao government.  
END SUMMARY.

Defense Attach Exchange

12. (SBU) In June 2007, Colonel (now General) Sisophonh Bang-One Sengdet went to the United States on a Distinguished Visitors Program that kicked off our newly activated International Military Exchange and Training (IMET) program. During his visit, he proposed that Laos and the U.S. exchange defense attaches in 2008. This announcement came as a surprise, since Lao government officials had consistently stated that they were not ready even to discuss an exchange of attaches. Both sides are making preparations to open defense attach offices later this year. Two Lao military officers

began English language training at DLI in San Antonio in early June, and we believe they will join the DATT Office in Washington (ref A) when it opens. Embassy Vientiane's DATT office is scheduled to open by the end of 2008.

#### JPAC Cooperation

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**13.** (U) Although the United States did not break relations with Laos after the change of government in 1975, our relations were very limited for some time. The Embassy's Defense Attach Office closed after 1975. In the 1980s, U.S.-Lao cooperation on accounting for the missing from the pre-1975 war years was a first step toward improving relations. The Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and its predecessors have laid a basis for resumed cooperation that over the years expanded into new areas including counter-narcotics, unexploded ordnance clearance, and health. However, all contacts with MND, even on the MIA issue, remained very structured and limited. This began to change in 2007.

#### SMEEs Begin...

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**14.** (SBU) Following our first expanded bilateral defense dialogues with MFA and MND in January 2007 (ref B), the GOL accepted U.S. proposals for training programs -- Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEEs) -- including a MARFORPAC-funded August 2007 avian influenza (AI) tabletop exercise for 130 people, including 70 military officers (ref C), and a PACAF-funded medical SMEE in September 2007 involving nursing, CPR, and cleft lip surgery training attended by 100 medical specialists from both the civilian and military sectors.

(Note: the Lao like the term "SMEE" because of the implied equality of those involved in the training, and thus we use this terminology

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for all of our programs here.)

... and Expand

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**15.** (U) Following our second, larger-scale Bilateral Defense Dialogue in October 2007 (ref D), PACAF funded a January 2008 AI training for trainers SMEE for 70 specialists including 35 military officers (ref E). PACAF returned to Vientiane for a three-week Emergency Responder SMEE beginning July 7. The PACOM Surgeon's Office sent a needs assessment team to visit July 14-17 to assess possible HIV/AIDS cooperation with the Lao military as a next step. The Embassy is also discussing cooperation with the Lao military on clearance of unexploded ordnance. Our third Bilateral Defense Dialogue has been proposed for mid-August in Honolulu.

#### Humanitarian Assistance Programs Increase

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**16.** (U) As these Vientiane-based SMEEs become more complex and longer, other areas of cooperation are expanding as well. PACOM has provided more than two million dollars in funding for humanitarian assistance (HA) projects during the past decade in support of the JPAC mission in Laos. These 19 projects have included medical clinics, schools, and water projects in provincial areas where JPAC requires cooperation from the local population to carry out its excavation and investigation activities. In the past two years our HA cooperation has increased. In 2007 PACOM funded construction of two medical clinics in southern Laos' Sekong Province valued in excess of \$300,000. In 2008 PACOM plans to construct two clinics and one school in three other provinces. In addition, PACAF has supplemented humanitarian assistance through the donation of medical supplies worth more than \$100,000 during the past twelve months.

#### MND Regional Exposure

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**17.** (U) We have seen similar breakthroughs in military exchanges. General Sisophonh attended the PACOM-sponsored Chiefs of Defense Conference in Honolulu in October 2007, the first time Laos has sent a participant to the conference. Admiral Keating, who visited Vientiane in December 2007 (ref F), received a significantly warmer welcome than General Fallon had in 2006. In addition, senior Lao military personnel are increasingly allowed to participate with PACOM in major regional meetings. Two senior medical officers attended the Asia-Pacific Military Medicine Conference (APMMC) in

Singapore in April 2008. Two others are scheduled to attend the 32nd Pacific Armies Management Seminar (PAMS XXXII) in Jakarta in August. The Lao have also been invited to attend the 2nd Asia-Pacific Military Nursing Conference in Seoul in September, co-hosted by the U.S. Pacific Air Force. In addition, Lao military, foreign ministry, and even public security officers have attended programs such as PACOM's Symposium on East Asia Security (SEAS) in 2007 and 2008 and a Peacekeeping Operations Seminar sponsored by PACOM and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations in Kuala Lumpur in June 2008.

#### Increasing APCSS and COE Participation

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¶18. (U) Lao civilian and military officers have attended the Executive Course at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Honolulu regularly for more than 10 years. This year however, Laos sent its first participant, Assistant Foreign Minister Alounkeo Kittikhoun, to APCSS's Senior Executive Course, a major step forward. Lao officials are also attending the APCSS "Comprehensive Crisis Management" and "Comprehensive Security Responses to Terrorism" courses for the first time.

¶19. (U) The Lao have also been enthusiastic attendees at a range of regional training courses hosted by the Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (COE), including laboratory workshops on influenza viruses, rapid response training on pandemic influenza, and joint regional military HIV/AIDS

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technical training workshops. In addition, a Lao oral surgeon who had participated in PACAF's September 2007 medical SMEE joined the USNS Mercy in Vietnam in June, 2008, to participate in Operation Smile, a program in which medical volunteers repair childhood facial deformities.

#### COMMENT

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¶10. (SBU) The vast array of substantive interaction now underway with the Lao military - and the rapidity with which this has been achieved -- is the most dramatic and positive development in our improving bilateral relationship. At training programs in the past year, American military personnel have appeared in uniform in public in Laos, another first since 1975. The participation of high-level Lao officials in PACOM-hosted meetings and the keen attendance of Lao military personnel in various training programs, including at APCSS and those organized by COE, demonstrate significant progress in an expanding military-to-military relationship. Since members of the Lao military continue to dominate the upper ranks of the Politburo and party central committee, improvements in the military-to-military relationship have important implications for the bilateral relationship as a whole. The successful military engagement since early 2007 has been possible due to the quarter-century of relationship-building by Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and its predecessors and close cooperation with the GOL on humanitarian issues for more than a decade. Embassy Vientiane greatly appreciates the efforts of our colleagues at DOD and PACOM, whose efforts have played a crucial role in our improving bilateral relationship.

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